

January 5, 2005

Contact:

Libby Garrison, 415.357.4177, lgarrison@sfmoma.org
Robyn Wise, 415.357.4172, rwise@sfmoma.org
Sandra Farish Sloan, 415.357.4174, ssloan@sfmoma.org

SFMOMA ANNOUNCES ACQUISITION OF TWO MAJOR CONTEMPORARY WORKS

***Multiple Grotto* by Olafur Eliasson and *Lilith* by Kiki Smith**

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) is pleased to announce the acquisition of two important works of contemporary art.

Olafur Eliasson

Multiple Grotto, 2004
stainless steel; 180 x 180 x 180 in.

Olafur Eliasson aims to annul the idea of the object as something that lies outside and beyond the viewer. With *Multiple Grotto*, he invites viewers to literally enter a room-size metallic structure shaped like a crystalline form, whose interior resembles the inside of a kaleidoscope. Once inside this all-enveloping structure, one witnesses a seemingly boundless permutation of glowing shapes, evoking such things as snowflakes, crystals, and origami forms. Eliasson challenges viewers' often passive visual absorption of works of art as refracted crystalline vistas appear with every turn of the head. The visitor's experience is utterly reconfigured as the gaze is redirected in multiple directions, engendering a state of heightened perception and reception. This state of vivid visual intensity is the defining principle of Eliasson's work. *Multiple Grotto* exists as much as an experience, unique to each visitor, as an object.

An important characteristic of Eliasson's work is that even as the work's clear material basis and construction are fully revealed, its emotional charge remains undeniable. His technical means are always straightforward and made overt, and this transparency of structure and materials is intrinsic to the work's content. Revealing his work's construction renders it no less magical, however.

"*Multiple Grotto* is extraordinary for striking a fine balance between raw materiality and a sublime insubstantial effect. Thus, Eliasson interrupts and yet continues to keep alive the northern romantic tradition of



Olafur Eliasson, *Multiple Grotto*, 2004; Collection SFMOMA, Accessions Committee Fund purchase; © Olafur Eliasson

the sublime that he is a part of culturally,” states Madeleine Grynsztejn, SFMOMA’s Elise S. Haas Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture.

Eliasson is among the generation of artists who are expanding upon the legacy of Postminimalism in surprising and provocative ways. An obvious precursor to *Multiple Grotto* is the sculpture of Robert Smithson, with whom Eliasson shares an interest in crystallographic structures. Postminimalism is an important strength of SFMOMA’s collection, and *Multiple Grotto* enhances the concentration in this area.

Eliasson is among the most important and exciting artists working internationally. Born in Denmark in 1967 to Icelandic parents, he studied from 1989 to 1995 at the Royal Academy of Arts in Copenhagen, where he was deeply influenced by the work of artists Robert Irwin and James Turrell of California’s Light and Space movement. Eliasson was part of an international generational shift away from object-making and toward experimentation with visual phenomena and experientially based work using intangible and ephemeral materials. It was during his student days that he also began an ongoing engagement with the philosophy of phenomenology and its focus on the workings of consciousness, and especially visual perception.

Being of Icelandic parentage, Eliasson is naturally informed by that country’s primordial nature and spectacular weather—rich source material. He has made use of such elements as light, water, ice, fog, arctic moss, and lava rock to create altogether new circumstances in which the viewer is immersed in “devices for the experience of reality,” to use the artist’s words. Natural phenomena are taken out of context and put toward the creation of mind-bending installations that explore the intersection of nature, science, and art, engaging—and even astonishing—the viewer/participant.

Since 1997, Eliasson’s numerous solo museum exhibitions include presentations at the Kunsthalle Basel (1997); the Castello di Rivoli in Turin (1999); The Art Institute of Chicago (2000); The Kunsthau, Bregenz (2001); Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (2002); the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (2003); and The Menil Collection, Houston (2004). Eliasson was the Danish representative for the 2003 Venice Biennale. Perhaps his most visible project to date has been *The Weather Project*, a gargantuan installation inside the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern, London, in 2003. SFMOMA is proud to be undertaking the first U.S. survey of Eliasson’s work, scheduled to open in 2007.



Kiki Smith, *Lilith*, 1994; Collection SFMOMA, Accessions Committee Fund purchase; © Kiki Smith; photo: Ellen Page Wilson

Kiki Smith

Lilith, 1994

bronze and glass; 33 x 27 ½ x 19 in.

Lilith is among Kiki Smith’s most powerful works and is an icon of contemporary sculpture. A bronze cast of a woman’s body, the figure crouches spider-like on the gallery wall, its eerily human glass eyes staring up at the

viewer. Smith began her career inside the body, representing individual organs and systems as fragments from anatomy textbooks. *Lilith* represents the culmination of her gradual movement to its exterior to depict the full human figure, and it presents her at the height of her formal powers.

A hallmark of Smith's work is her evocative mimicry of human flesh through careful selection of sculptural media. While this typically meant wax or paper in her early pieces, she perfected her use of bronze with *Lilith*. The rough-hewn surface suggests a woman still in the process of being formed, while the bronze's material qualities suggest her position as a creature of the night and the air—one that hovers almost preternaturally in defiance of gravity's force on the cast metal.

Lilith also marks a shift in Smith's work away from an earthly view of the body as abused and dissected toward an iconography of spirituality, nature, and the cosmos. The title refers to a character from Jewish legend, Adam's first wife, who, because she was created equally from dust, refused to take a subordinate role and was expelled from Eden. While accounts about Lilith vary, most sources agree she became a demon of the night and the air who obsessively sought revenge for her punishment.

Lilith is part of Smith's larger project of the mid-nineties that sought to reclaim various female figures from religion and mythology. While some of her "female superheroes" are eminently familiar in art history, particularly the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, others have been largely unrepresented in visual culture, among them Lot's wife and Lilith. Smith's radical reordering of the ancient traditions of figurative art encourages us to consider the equally deep-seated notions of femininity that we inherit with these formative tales.

Unquestionably one of the most important artists of her generation, Smith has built her career on depictions of the human body, insisting that we rethink the symbolic weight—emotional, spiritual, and cultural—that it carries. Smith came to the fore of the art world in the late 1980s and 1990s, a moment when debates about the body pervaded both artistic and popular dialogues. Although her sculpture and printmaking have at times depicted life at its most debased, these allegorical meditations nonetheless convey the powerful endurance of human life.

Born in Nuremberg, Germany, in 1954, Smith moved the following year to South Orange, New Jersey, with her parents, opera singer and stage actress Jane Lawrence Smith and abstract sculptor Tony Smith. Although she met a number of artists as a child, including Barnett Newman and Richard Tuttle, her early professional life was nomadic, as she shuttled between New York and San Francisco and worked variously as a surveyor, an electrician's assistant, a bartender, and a cook, as well as trained to be an emergency medical technician. Eventually she became involved with the artists' collective CoLab, and by the mid-eighties she had begun her art career in earnest.

Her breakthrough solo exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Berkeley Art Museum in 1990 and 1991, respectively, led to solo exhibitions at venues including the MAK Galerie, Vienna; the Louisiana Museum, Denmark; the Israel Museum; the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; and the Kestner Gesellschaft, Germany. She also has participated in many important group exhibitions, including three

Whitney Museum of American Art Biennials and two Venice Bienniales. Her current exhibition, *Kiki Smith: A Gathering, 1980–2005*, organized by the Walker Art Center, is her most complete retrospective to date; it premiered at SFMOMA in the fall of 2005 before traveling to the Walker, the Contemporary Art Museum in Houston, and the Whitney in New York.

Both works are currently on view in SFMOMA's galleries.

* * *

Visit our Web site at www.sfmoma.org or call 415.357.4000 for more information.

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is a private, not-for-profit institution supported by its members; individual contributors; corporate and foundation support; foreign, federal, state, and city government grants; and admission revenues. Annual programming is sustained through the generosity of Grants for the Arts/San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund, the James Irvine Foundation, and the Koret Foundation Funds. KidstART free admission for children 12 and under is made possible by Charles Schwab & Co., Inc. Thursday evening half-price admission is sponsored by Banana Republic.

#